Kamakhya & Ambubachi Mela

Kamakhya, the Goddess of Desire and Illusion is a moody woman who takes a form to match her mood. She has six differently coloured heads, wears chunky jewellery and bright red clothes. She holds a gold bowl or a skull in one of her twelve hands and weapons in the others. Sometimes she sits on a lotus on top of Shiva who seems to be sleeping on a lion.

In some temples, Kamakhya is worshipped as Kameshwari, a 16-year-old virgin goddess. In others, she is Kamarupini, who satiates her desire with her consort Shiva. Some consider her to be a form of Tripura Sundari and call her Shodashi. And according to the Kalika Puran, Kamakhya is the mother of the cosmos, the primordial Shakti.

Naraka’s desire for Kamakhya

Naraka, the son of Bhoomi and the Varaha avatar of Vishnu meditates on Brahma and asks for two boons: that only his mother can kill him and he can choose the time of his death. Brahma grants both wishes and disappears.

Naraka now believes he is invincible because he thinks no mother can kill her son. When he sees Kamakhya he is besotted by her beauty and expresses his desire to marry her. But Kamakhya rejects him. Several times. So Naraka vents out his anger on the people of the nearby villages.

Kamakhya tells him that she will marry him if he can build a staircase from the bottom of the Nilanchal hill to the top of it within one night. Naraka uses his occult powers and is almost

done with building the staircase before daybreak. But Kamakhya disturbs a few sleeping roosters before dawn and makes them crow.

Naraka hears the roosters' cries, thinks he has failed in his task and stops building the staircase. But after a while, he realizes that the Devi has duped him. So he chases the roosters and kills them all.

In the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, Assam, the place where roosters are sacrificed is known as Kukurakata. We can also see an incomplete/endless staircase leading to nowhere known as Mekhelauja Path here.

Naraka's fury

Narakasura vents out his wrath by conquering Swarga and Bhoomi. He steals the divine earrings of Aditi, Indra's mother and kidnaps 16,100 other women too. Aditi is dismayed because her earrings protected her family from danger. She meets Satyabhama, Krishna's wife and narrates her woes to her.

Several yugas have passed. Bhoomi, Naraka's mother is reborn as Satyabhama. Satyabhama is furious when she sees Aditi's sorry plight. She seeks Krishna's help, mounts Garuda, massacres Naraka's entire army, brings Naraka down and returns Aditi's earrings. Krishna marries the 16,100 princesses to give them a place of honour in society.

Naraka is breathing his last but is not yet dead. He knows he can choose the time of his death. It is now that he realizes how

powerful the veil of illusion, Maya can be. He sings hymns in praise of Kamakhya. Kamakhya reveals her true form of Kali to him. Naraka tells Kali that he wishes to be remembered as her devotee. Kamakhya fulfils his wish saying that the day before Diwali will be celebrated as Naraka Chaturdashi after which he breathes his last.

Kamakhya: Sati’s Yoni

When Sati hears about her father Daksha’s yagna, she tells Shiva that she too wants to visit her family. Shiva forbids her from going there. He says we should never go where we are not welcomed or respected. Sati, however, does not appreciate Shiva's well-meaning advice and flies into a rage.

She transforms into Shyama, the blue coloured Kali, releases ten forms of her Shakti and dances around Shiva. These ten forms of Kali, the Dasa-MahaVidyas are enshrined in the Kamakhya temple at Guwahati. Shiva has no choice. He sees his Shakti going away from him. But he remains silent because He knows He cannot do anything about it.

The rest of the story is familiar. Daksha insults Shiva, so Sati immolates herself and brings the yagna to a halt. Shiva flies into a rage, wreaks havoc in Daksha’s kingdom, carries Sati’s corpse around the entire cosmos and weeps his soul out with grief. Vishnu shocks him out of his grief by releasing his Sudarshan Chakra which cuts the body of Sati into 51 different parts. The place where Sati’s genitals, her Yoni fell is the sacred Kamakhya temple, in Guwahati, Assam which is the oldest of the 51 other Shakti Peethas

The Kamakhya temple

The Kamakhya temple is built on the Nilanchal Hill in west Guwahati, Assam. According to the Kalika Puran, Sati met Shiva secretly in the night to satiate her desire in this place. It is believed to be the birthplace of Mother Earth and the seat of Shaktism and Tantra.

A stone sculpture representing Sati's Yoni, her genitals, is enshrined here. A natural spring representing the womb of the goddess keeps the sacred stone- Yoni moist.

Kamakhya, Tripurasundari, Matangi and Kamala Devi reside within the main temple. The other 7 Mahavidyas: Kali, Tara, Bhuvaneshwari, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Dhumavati and Bagalamukhi are enshrined in individual temples around it. The Yoni enshrined in the Kamakhya temple symbolises the source of all our desires, the hill represents Shiva and it is believed that the entire mountain turned blue (Nilanchal) when her Yoni fell on it.

Ambubachi Mela

Kamakhya, a form of Shakti/Prakriti quarantines herself when she menstruates annually. The Ambubachi Mela, an annual fair, celebrates Kamakhya's fertility and life-giving abilities, which is a crucial aspect of Mother Nature. So the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati and all the other temples in this region remain closed for three days.

It is believed that Shakti/Prakriti likes to rest when she menstruates. Nobody farms, worships the deities that they

have enshrined in their homes or reads any holy books during these three days because they do not want to disturb Goddess Kamakhya, their mother.

Goddess Kamakhya & Ambubachi Mela

Goddess Kamakhya is draped in red clothes. A special red cloth is also offered to her to absorb her menstrual fluid. She is offered only light meals of fruits and water. After three days, She is bathed and worshipped with rituals after which her devotees can do her darshan.

The predominant colour in the Kamakhya temple at this time is red. The atmosphere is sober yet festive as people chant “Prithibi Rajashala Hoi” which means Prithvi is in quarantine because she is menstruating. On the fourth day, people line up to get a sacred piece of the red cloth that was draped around her, wear it around their arms because they believe it will help and protect them. Roosters, buffaloes and goats are sacrificed to please her.

Goddess Kamakhya Says…

You are a modern woman. Why do you feel ashamed, embarrassed or guilty when you are quarantined during your periods? Accept your periods with dignity and quiet pride for they remind you of your womanhood – the woman in you – the one you often neglect. Rejoice in your birth-giving ability. Appreciate and respect your body. Give it a break. It deserves one too. Regularly. Spend time with yourself during your

period. Like me. For you too are Shakti. And without you and me, Shakti - even God and the rest of the world cannot exist.

Shiva, my Lord of detachment and my strong brave lion too lie below me. You too are strong. You too should detach yourself from your samsara, your beloved family for three days. Because you matter. And you should take good care of yourself too. And I'm sure your beloved family will start appreciating you more instead of taking you for granted if you do so. So…. Just. Chill. During. Your periods. Period.